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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 002470

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: "WE ARE COMMUNISTS, BUT WE ARE NOT FOOLS:" CPI(M)
LEADERSHIP UNLIKELY TO END SUPPORT FOR THE UPA

REF: A. NEW DELHI 01710

[B](#). NEW DELHI 1854

Classified By: DCM Robert O. Blake, Jr., for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The Communist Party of India-Marxist, the CPI(M) or CPM, the most organized and important member of India's Left Front (LF), will debate whether to change its leadership at its April 6-12 Party Congress. The CPI (M) patriarch, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who steered the party to its pro-Congress stance, is 89 years old and in very poor health, and under pressure to step down after 13 years in office. Rumors persist, however, that Surjeet is not yet ready to relinquish the mantle, despite being almost totally blind and deaf. Prakesh Karat, the person most likely to replace him, is ideologically a Marxist hardliner who espouses a more aggressive posture toward the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Under his leadership, the party would likely have a more contentious relationship with the Congress leadership. Despite this, his ascension would not significantly alter the party's relatively moderate stance and willingness to support the UPA coalition government over the near term, as he would be restrained by more moderate, experienced party heavyweights. India's Communist parties enjoy newfound power and influence as a result of their association with the UPA, and are unlikely to do anything to jeopardize it, such as withdrawing support from the UPA, which would bring down the government and provide an opening for the BJP to return to power. End Summary.

"We Are Marxists, But We Are Not Fools"

[1](#)2. (C) Front-runner Prakash Karat, despite his opposition to direct foreign investment and privatization, is unlikely to change the pragmatic, calibrated CPI (M) approach to politics that accommodates ideological differences at local, regional, and national levels (Ref A). Recognizing that it cannot at present replace capitalism with a socialist or communist economic system, the CPI (M) is focusing on more immediate goals, such as ensuring that the Center's reforms do not "go too far," and that India's economic development does not "leave the poor and powerless behind." Communist leaders with actual governing experience, such as West Bengal's Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, are open to foreign and private investment for infrastructure development in the state as long as it "takes care of the working class." Bhattacharjee, for example, has in the past asked New Delhi to offer special incentives for foreign investment in six industrially backwards districts of North Bengal. His government also has worked with industrial houses to support the expansion West Bengal's machine tool and electronics sectors, and "joined hands" with foreign investors to develop ports, airports, and roads.

[1](#)3. (C) Karat, by contrast, is a lifelong CPI (M) functionary and has never run for political office -- he has never even seen the inside of the "bourgeois Parliament" -- or been responsible for the day-to-day functioning of government. This increases the likelihood that he will be more amenable to attempts by Marxist pragmatists to temper his ideological zeal when faced with the day to day running of the party. Moreover, because of Communist discipline, Karat has no choice but to follow the dictates of the party if it decides to continue along the moderate path.

[1](#)4. (C) Left sources have told Poloff that the CPI(M) does not have a provision to force a Party president from office, and that Surjeet has indicated that he does not want to step down. There is also considerable speculation that the ambitious Sitaram Yechury is the choice of powerful party moderates such as Jyoti Basu. As a "cadre based" party, the CPI(M) prefers not to conduct party disputes in public. If it cannot resolve the Yechury/Karat rivalry behind the scenes and out of the public eye, there may be a consensus to keep Surjeet on. Several CPI(M) watchers and Forward Block MP Subrata Bose told Poloff that Karat is not yet ready to take the helm, does not have the stature and widespread respect of Surjeet, and is unlikely to be as adept at managing Communist/Congress relations, and needs several years of further experience.

Seeking to Expand Its Support Base

14. (SBU) If Karat were to take charge, he would likely would attempt to harness the Communists, growing power and popular momentum to push its immediate agenda and broaden its support base beyond the "red forts" of West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura. CPI(M) experience in West Bengal, where it has "creatively applied Marxism to India's society," has ensured its survival there for the last 27 years, and it is looking to build on its success, while adapting to a post-Cold War world, and redefining "the struggle." In this new environment, the "class enemy" is no longer "capitalist imperialism," but the neo-liberal economic and development policies espoused by the US and "captive" multilateral lending institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Communists are also moving away from a combative approach and towards a commitment to parliamentary and electoral politics, appealing to a wider audience.

15. (SBU) Former West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI(M) heavyweight Jyoti Basu admitted that the "world has changed where militant trade unionism has no place," and said the Communist parties were wrong in allowing aggressive labor movements during the 1980-90s. According to Basu, Communists also recognize that India's traditional caste struggle overlaps with the socialist emphasis on "class struggle," and that Communists can use caste to develop a wider base of support. The party has also made it clear that it will continue alliances with non-Communist parties -- for specific electoral purposes -- as it did with Congress in Maharashtra, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar, and the RJD, Congress, and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in Jharkhand. CPI(M) State Secretary for West Bengal and influential Politburo member Anil Biswas told US officials the CPI(M) was "reaching out" to small, regional parties who "have no ideology, unlike the CPI(M)" to form coalitions, and that the party was focusing on developing party structure and bases in "other areas," such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and Kashmir.

16. (U) Karat would also try to take advantage of Congress's recent election gaffes to siphon off disillusioned defectors from other parties (Ref B). Bihar and Jharkhand, whose dominant political parties have been discredited in the recent state elections, are fertile territory for the CPI(M). Communist parties have been very successful in recruiting new members on university campuses, but have trouble keeping them after they graduate and enter the workforce. They are conducting an internal review to devise an effective policy to retain membership. Biswas acknowledged that the CPI(M) "needed change" and "to bring up" new members.

Challenges Ahead for CPI (M)

17. (C) The untested and inexperienced young leadership -- neither Karat nor Politburo member Sitram Yechury have actual governing experience -- may have trouble bringing the CPI(M) into the next generation. Older Leftist leaders such as Forward Bloc MP Subrata Bose and CPI(M) icon Jyoti Basu are concerned that Karat will not be as adept is handling the Congress or even the Left Front coalition as well as Surjeet. Basu, however, predicted to Poloff that "he will grow." The CPI(M) has rudimentary party organization in most of India's urban areas and limited appeal outside of its traditional strongholds. Once a favorite of the middle class because of its anti-establishment stance and relatively clean image, the party has had difficulty maintaining its appeal in an era when rapid economic expansion presents new opportunities for the urban middle class. According to a leading Kolkata businessman, the trade unions, once a breeding ground for future Communist leaders, no longer attract the "talent," making it difficult for the Communist parties to groom a new generation of leaders. Embassy contacts also point out that, because the Communist parties are unwilling to join the Central government, they are not an "attractive option" for budding leaders.

18. (U) Karat and others also face a challenge from Naxalites and Maoist parties, which strongly emphasize rural and low-caste recruitment. Karat and the new generation leaders have advocated that the CPI(M) and other mainstream Communist parties expand into the rural areas, where Maoists and Naxalites have laid the foundation by cultivating support and educating the rural poor about Marxism.

Congress/Communist Coalition

19. (SBU) Some Congress insiders are concerned that should the ideologically more aggressive Karat become party leader, the CPI(M) could withdraw support for the UPA alliance. Surjeet, who steered the party to a pro-Congress stance, was primarily focused on keeping the BJP out of power, with Communist cohesion a secondary factor. Karat would place more emphasis on Communist cohesion and developing a more

united Left Front alternative than worrying about a BJP resurgence, raising concerns that he will be less willing to placate the UPA. Senior Communist leaders hope Karat will moderate his stance should he become party president, and would probably try to rein him in if they believed he was taking the Party and the LF in the wrong direction.

¶10. (C) Rajat Roy, Associate Editor of the West Bengali daily Anandazabhar Patrika and a long-time Left observer, told Poloff that although in the near term Karat would not do anything to bring down the UPA government, over the long run, Karat's appointment would negatively impact the Left-Congress relationship. Karat would likely rally the hardline faction and marginalize the older, more moderate cadres. Roy noted that Karat was a very experienced party insider and could "control the party" and put his supporters into the influential Politburo. This could potentially weaken the CPI(M) over the long run, as dogmatic hardliners would be less willing to "change with the times" as Basu, Bhattacharjee, and Surjeet have done.

¶11. (C) Roy also commented that Karat "doesn't like to deal with the Congress" and the role of intermediary, usually performed by the ailing Surjeet, would be delegated to Sitaram Yechury, who "loves the camera and acting as interlocutor." Roy posited that the combination of Karat (the private power) and Yechury (the public face) would be good for the CPI(M).

Comment

¶12. (C) Karat's ascension may make CPI(M)/UPA cooperation more difficult, but is unlikely to result in a separation in the near future. The party leadership makes a clear distinction between the political and economic agenda of the Congress coalition, disparaging Congress commitment to "neo-liberalism," while supporting Congress secularism. This was typified by CPI(M) Rajya Sabha MP Nilotpal Basu who stated that "there is a disconnect between Congress President Sonia Gandhi's vision and the policies of the Government."

¶13. (C) Despite its "faults," the Communists overwhelmingly prefer secular Congress ideology to that of the "communist rightists" of the BJP. The CPI(M)'s view of Congress as a treacherous ally to be kept in check through constant brinkmanship is a philosophy that will play to Karat's hardline positions. From the UPA side, the PM has developed a symbiotic relationship with the Left, believing it balances against over-zealous reformers, and has even incorporated some LF ideas into UPA governance.

¶14. (C) Should the Left become too problematic, however, the PM may become more isolated and the UPA may reassess its strategy. The CPI(M) leadership believes that should Karat try to take the party in an unpopular direction, he can be reined in. The Communist parties are renowned for their party discipline. Although they may have contentious backroom debates, Karat will ultimately follow party dictates.

Bio Data For Prakash Karat

¶15. (SBU) Karat is a powerful member of the CPI(M) Politburo and one of India's best-known Leftists. The relatively young (approximately 56 years old) and articulate CPI(M) spokesman has climbed to the upper ranks of a party dominated by octogenarians. Karat is now seen, along with Sitaram Yechury, as a leadership candidate to succeed aging party heavyweights such as General Secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet and former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. Ideologically a Marxist hardliner, Karat is a consensus candidate, and his election would represent an attempt to placate the important, but more dogmatic, Kerala constituency, which views Sitaram Yechury as too moderate.

¶16. (SBU) Karat is an ideologue opposed to foreign direct investment, privatization, and "interference" in Indian affairs by the United States and multilateral lending agencies such as the World Bank and IMF and remains focused on class struggle. Indicative of his lack of interest in developing a positive relationship with the United States, he has reportedly stated that "India should not act as a US agent in South Asia." Karat did not support the Communist decision to back the UPA. Having never contested an election or held an government position, his hardline views are not tempered by executive experience, unlike many of the Communist leaders in West Bengal, who are more open to foreign investment in infrastructure in the state.

¶17. (SBU) Born into a middle class Hindu family of Kerala. He graduated from Madras Christian College before earning a M.A. in economics from Edinburgh University, Scotland. After returning to India, he attended the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), then the Mecca of Indian Marxists, as an M.Phil/Ph.D. student, but did not complete his degree. Drawn

to politics since his campus days in Chennai, Karat was elected President of the JNU Students Union in the 1970s before plunging into full-time CPI (M) politics. He was initiated into politics by communist veteran, A.K. Gopalan, and was closely associated with the first Communist Chief Minister of Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodaripad. He has authored and edited several books, including "World To Win," a volume of essays explaining the relevance of the communist manifesto. Karat is married to Brinda Karat, a well-known feminist leader. He described by US officials as urbane, sophisticated, and a good organizer.

MULFORD